

U.S. House of Representatives
Ways and Means Committee
Subcommittee on Human Resources

Hearing on "Improving Programs Designed to Protect At-Risk Youth"
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Testimony by:
The Honorable Karen R. Bass of California

Good morning Chairman Davis, Ranking Member Doggett, and distinguished Members of the Committee. Thank you for the opportunity to testify here today regarding the critical issue of improving programs designed to protect at risk youth and prevent placement in foster care.

I represent the 33rd district of California covering South and West LA. I ran for public office after my experiences in the community founding and running a nonprofit and witnessing the struggles of families with the emergence of the crack cocaine epidemic. I became aware that many relatives were providing care for grandchildren removed from parents unable to care for them, and I came first to the California Legislature and now Congress determined to address problems with our system and to fix them.

And in California we've made enormous strides with reforming our system. In 1999 there were 140,000 children and youth removed from their homes and placed into foster care. Today, there are 57,000. In Los Angeles County there were 55,000 children removed from their homes – today there are about 15,000.

I am proud to say that as Speaker of the California State Assembly, we took a big step to help the older youth last year by opting in to the federal Fostering Connections to Success Act by passing my Assembly Bill 12. As you know, the Fostering Connections Act was unanimously passed by Congress in 2008 and signed into law by President George W. Bush. We are very excited about implementing our state legislation and putting our youth on a path to education, self-sufficiency, and contributing members of our communities.

But the fact remains there is still enormous work to do to improve our system to help at risk children and families prevent entry into foster care. By providing help to families to prevent the spiral into abuse and neglect we would avoid the substantial costs of foster care, avoid the trauma of removal, and help families stay together.

To the contrary, in the current child welfare system the primary focus is on families that have already been identified with child abuse and/or neglect issues. This ends up with families being separated, children in foster care, costly efforts at reunification, and a system that has had more failures than successes. The fact

that Title IV-E funding cannot be used for prevention or post-reunification services has created a significant challenge to achieving better safety outcomes and finding permanent homes for children. However, in jurisdictions like Los Angeles County, many of these challenges have been mitigated because of the availability of Title IV-E flexible funding waivers allow the county to implement prevention strategies outside of funding constraints and dollars chiefly tied to out-of-home removal. And because of the efforts of this committee, the House recently passed legislation introduced by Rep. McDermott and Mr. Davis to expand HHS' authority to grant waivers to 10 more states.

Given the limited number of IV-E waivers, the Promoting Safe and Stable Families (PSSF) funding is essentially the only resource currently available that can finance support services to families. PSSF funds can be used to provide a continuum of services that support families that have entered the child welfare system and are working towards reunification (family preservation programming), as well as expanding efforts to prevent families from entering the system or diverting them when they are identified. However, PSSF funding is not sufficient to provide the amount of services necessary to truly effect change in the existing structure.

Until the financing of child welfare is “reformed” to enable States to have flexibility in their response to families, it is essential that PSSF funding be increased to allow for the expansion of services that can help families to remain intact and reduce the use of foster care as an answer to family problems that can be resolved if intervention is provided. States also need to be offered guidance and incentives for expanding services that focus on prevention and early intervention for families at risk of child abuse and neglect.

Throughout the country, there are many examples of programs that have been successful in keeping families out of the system or maintaining the family unit while addressing the concerns of child abuse and neglect. One promising practice is the Differential Response Framework which offers a broad set of strategies for working with families at the first signs of trouble based on their level of need or risk that is identified. Differential Response is an evidence-based approach to preventing child abuse and neglect by ensuring child safety through expanding the ability of child welfare agencies to respond to reports of child maltreatment. Because of the effectiveness of the model, in California, there is an effort to expand this response to address families that are “at risk” of being involved in the

system because of issues such as substance abuse, mental health and domestic violence.

California's decision to incorporate prevention and early intervention is based on the success achieved through programs funded by PSSF and Waiver funding. In Los Angeles County alone, these services: (1) reduced the number of children in foster care from 50,000 in 1999 to less than 14,000 in 2011; (2) reduced the length of stay in foster care from 2 years to 1; (3) saved the system over \$15 million in funding because of the reduction in foster care costs.

At SHIELDS for Families in South Los Angeles, PSSF (and Waiver) funding has been utilized to pioneer programming that has effectively kept families out of the system or been able to rapidly address family issues while keeping children at home. Under the direction of Kathy Isenhower, SHIELDS has been providing services to the entire family unit, with specific programs for children ages 0-18, since opening its first substance abuse program, Genesis, in 1990. Since 2002, over 1200 children have been served in conjunction with their mothers. Their models have been used throughout Los Angeles County and the Country to inform prevention and early intervention efforts for high risk families and could serve as a model for PSSF funding guidance. These include the following:

Up Front Assessments: In 2004, the Los Angeles County Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS) implemented a pilot program to address the high number of children in foster care. Point of Engagement (POE). POE is a process that attempts to engage the family *as soon as possible* after referral to the Department in order to assess the family and provide services that might allow the family to *avoid child detainment altogether*. The project also represented a paradigm shift from a focus solely on child safety to looking at the family and their caretaking ability.

SHIELDS provided the Up Front Assessment component of POE for the two offices that piloted the program: Wateridge and Compton. Working with both offices, SHIELDS developed a standard program for implementing the Up Front Assessments, focused on families that experienced issues with substance abuse, mental health and/or domestic violence. SHIELDS worked in collaboration with DCFS to send a Clinical Assessor to conduct a home visit with the family immediately following their first contact with child welfare in order to assess the

capacity of the parents to care for the child(ren), to determine the family members' needs for services, and to link the family with the needed services.

Up Front Assessments have proven to be successful at providing families with the services they need in order to keep children at home with their parents. To date, SHIELDS has conducted over 6000 assessments for families, keeping approximately 9,201 children in their homes. All of these cases were high risk or

Comparing the costs of Up Front Assessment with those of child detainment:

Cost per assessment= \$350

Cost for 1 year of Foster Care= \$20,000

Estimated savings= \$104,020,000

very high risk and would have resulted in detention prior to the implementation of the pilot program. Of the families assessed, only 5 percent have resulted in detentions and subsequent dependency court cases—and in these cases, the amount of time that children are out of the home has been reduced to less than a year (previously close to two years). Instead, the majority of the families assessed became volunteer cases, avoiding the court and reducing the time the case is under DCFS jurisdiction (approximately six months).

The Point of Engagement Pilot has demonstrated that assessing families at the front end of their involvement with DCFS—and immediately linking them to the services they need—can significantly reduce the numbers of DCFS detentions and reduce the amount of time that families are under DCFS jurisdiction altogether. This means that more children remain in their homes, and that those few who are removed, are able to return home sooner. Through POE, all of this has been provided with no cost to the individual families. Due to the success of the original pilot, Up Front Assessments were implemented County-Wide in 2009.

ASK Prevention Initiative Demonstration Program: SHIELDS for Families ASK (Ask, Seek, Knock) program provides a continuum of accessible and seamless services utilizing a “one-stop” model located at four Family Resources Centers throughout South Los Angeles through funding provide the Los Angeles County Department of Children and Family Services. Through the co-location of eight core partnering agencies, the ASK program leverages resources and capacity support to address high-need areas targeting families referred by DCFS as well as any community member who seeks assistance. Through ASK, SHIELDS and its partners provide six

main services at each Resource Center: (1) resource navigation, (2) vocational and educational training, (3) visitation centers, (4) supportive services, and (5) legal services. Vocational and educational training includes high school diploma classes, after-school tutoring, computer training, job readiness and placement, as well as a certified Fiberoptics Technician Training program and employment opportunities in the telecommunications industry. A Legal Services Coordinator works in collaboration with Public Counsel Law Center, the Los Angeles County Region V GAIN office, and the Los Angeles County Child Support Services Department to provide legal services and education to the community on criminal record and traffic ticket expungement, child support, special education, adoptions and guardianships, and immigration. Implemented in 2008, to date we have served 7,244 families, logged over 50,000 hours of participation in classes and community workshops, and given over 20,264 successful referrals in 36 categories of need. In addition, over 300 individuals were placed in the work force and over 1000 families received free legal services.

Based on the evaluation conducted by Casey and USC, ASK has been successful in reducing the number of families referred or re-referred to the child welfare system with participation in the program. According to data analyzed on “re-referrals to DCFS after receiving PIDP services” during the program period (between June 2008 and July 2010), Emergency Response families (N=130) who accessed the ASK Centers in Compton were significantly less likely to be re-referred to DCFS. About 12 percent had re-referrals compared with 23 percent of the randomly selected comparison group. The PIDP group had a significant advantage over the comparison group for both subcategories of families (new referrals to DCFS and re-referrals on existing open cases). It should be noted that the Compton office experienced re-referrals on 31 percent of families referred to ER during this same period, a rate that was even higher than the experience of the comparison group. In addition, the group of 31 children in foster care whose families took advantage of ASK Centers were more likely to have planned positive “permanency exits” from foster care compared to children with open cases in the comparison group (100% vs. 83%).

Exodus Family Centered Treatment Program: The SHIELDS for Families’ Exodus Program, is a unique model in which comprehensive family-centered treatment, follow-up and related social services are provided within an 86 unit apartment complex. It is currently the only program in the United States that allows for the

entire family unit to live in the treatment environment in individual family apartments. Treatment, child development and youth services (Heros and Sheros), case management and vocational services are offered on-site at the facility. A maximum of 45 families are active in treatment at any given time, with approximately 170 children enrolled in program services on-site. After completion of treatment services (12-24 months), families are able to remain in their housing for a transitional period of up to one year, allowing for adequate time to develop vocational, educational and/or supportive systems necessary for ongoing recovery and family maintenance.

Since the program was implemented in 1994, outcome data has been closely monitored. During the initial stages of the program (1994-1999), Exodus was part of a national evaluation through the Center for Substance Abuse Treatment, in addition to a local evaluation through SHIELDS. National evaluation results established the program as a best practice model for the federal government in 2001. Evaluation outcomes of the program over the past five years (2002-2007) conducted through SHIELDS Research Division include:

- ***An 81.2% completion rate (national average = 25%).***
- ***Family reunification rates of 85%.***
- ***An average of 646 days in treatment (national average = less than 90 days).***
- ***All clients obtained a high school diploma.***

In the past 5 years, a total of 236 children ages 0-5 (95%) have received at least 1 developmental screening. Overall, 85% of children received scores that fell within the normal range of development, and 15% of children were identified with potential delays and referred for additional assessment and specialized services. Evaluation outcomes of the child development component include:

- ***Increase in parental knowledge of child development and parenting skills with parents scoring an average of 90% on post-test scores.***
- ***Over 200 parents received completion certificates for parenting and child development classes.***
- ***Success in achieving low rates of Very Low Birth Weight among infants born to enrolled mothers (average= 4.5% over the last six years, 0% in the last year).***
- ***High rates of entry into prenatal care (average=67% over the last six years, 72% in past year).***

- ***Immunization rates among enrolled children averaged 80% in the past 5 years***
- ***Of a total of 264 infants who were born in the program in the past 6 years, less than 6% had positive toxicology screens.***

Outcomes for Hero and Shero youth, ages 6-18, have been monitored through the use of seven standardized assessments, which are administered on a quarterly basis. Results indicate that the program has had a positive impact on participating youth:

- ***60% of participants improved attitudes towards school and education;***
- ***75% of participants improved grades in math and English;***
- ***77% of participants improved self esteem and self confidence;***
- ***77% of participants improved cultural awareness/identity and community mobilization skills;***
- ***80% of participants improved awareness of substance abuse related issues and made a commitment to live drug free.***

In conclusion, I would ask my colleagues to consider that an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure. As you work to reauthorize the Promoting Safe and Stable Families Act and IV-B provisions, these tried and proven community strategies are not only effective but cost effective and I encourage you to use prevention and early intervention models adopted by SHIELDS to inform your decision making.

Thank you for your work on these issues and I look forward to working with you all to continue to improve the lives of children and families.

I am happy to answer any questions you may have.